

# Chapter 39

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“Do you think you can decode it once we get the other half?” I said to Amren, lingering by the front door of her apartment the next afternoon. She owned the top floor of a three-story building, the sloped ceiling ending on either side in a massive window. One looked out on the Sidra; the other on a tree-lined city square. The entire apartment consisted of one giant room: the faded oak floors were covered in equally worn carpets, furniture was scattered about as if she constantly moved it for whatever purpose. Only her bed, a large, four-poster monstrosity canopied in gossamer, seemed set in a permanent place against the wall. There was no kitchen—only a long table and a hearth burning hot enough to make the room near-stifling. The dusting of snow from the night before had vanished in the dry winter sun by midmorning, the temperature crisp but mild enough that the walk here had been invigorating.

Seated on the floor before a low-lying table scattered with papers, Amren looked up from the gleaming metal of the book. Her face was paler than usual, her lips wan. “It’s been a long while since I used this language—I want to master it again before tackling the Book. Hopefully by then, those haughty queens will have given us their share.”

“And how long will relearning the language take?”

“Didn’t His Darkness fill you in?” She went back to the Book.

I strode for the long wooden table and set the package I’d brought on the scratched surface. A few pints of hot blood—straight from the butcher. I’d nearly run here to keep them from going cold. “No,” I said, taking out the containers. “He didn’t.” Rhys had already been gone by breakfast, though one of his notes had been on a bedside table.

Thank you—for last night, was all it had said. No pen to write a response. But I’d hunted down one anyway, and had written back, What do the tattooed stars and mountain on your knees mean? The paper had vanished a heartbeat later. When it hadn’t returned, I’d dressed and gone to breakfast. I was halfway through my eggs and toast when the paper appeared beside my plate, neatly folded.

That I will bow before no one and nothing but my crown. This time, a pen had appeared. I’d merely written back, So dramatic. And through our bond, on the other side of my mental shields, I could have sworn I heard his laugh.

Smiling at the memory, I unscrewed the lid on the first jar, the tang of blood filling my nostrils. Amren sniffed, then whipped her head to the glass pints. “You—oh, I like you.”

“It’s lamb, if that makes a difference. Do you want me to heat it up?” She rushed from the Book, and I just watched as she clutched the jar in both hands and gulped it down like water.

Well, at least I wouldn’t have to bother finding a pot in this place. Amren drank half in one go. A trickle of blood ran down her chin, and she let it drip onto her gray shirt—rumped in a way I’d never seen. Smacking her lips, she set the jar on the table with a great sigh. Blood gleamed on her teeth. “Thank you.”

“Do you have a favorite?”

She jerked her bloody chin, then wiped it with a napkin as she realized she’d made a mess. “Lamb has always been my favorite. Horrible as it is.”

“Not—human?”

She made a face. “Watery, and often tastes like what they last ate. And since most humans have piss-poor palates, it’s too much of a gamble. But lamb ... I’ll take goat, too. The blood’s purer. Richer. Reminds me of—another time. And place.”

“Interesting,” I said, and meant it. I wondered what world, exactly, she meant.

She drained the rest, color already blooming on her face, and placed the jar in the small sink along the wall.

“I thought you’d live somewhere more ... ornate,” I admitted. Indeed, all her fine clothes were hanging on racks near the bed, her jewelry scattered on a few armoires and tables. There was enough of the latter to provide an emperor’s ransom.

She shrugged, plopping down beside the Book once more. “I tried that once. It bored me. And I didn’t like having servants. Too nosy. I’ve lived in palaces and cottages and in the mountains and on the beach, but I somehow like this apartment by the river the best.” She frowned at the skylights that dotted the ceiling. “It also means I never have to host parties or guests. Both of which I abhor.”

I chuckled. “Then I’ll keep my visit short.”

She let out an amused huff, crossing her legs beneath her. “Why are you here?”

“Cassian said you’d been holed up in here night and day since we got back, and I thought you might be hungry. And—I had nothing else to do.”

“Cassian is a busybody.”

“He cares about you. All of you. You’re the only family he has.” They were all the only family they each had.

“Ach,” she said, studying a piece of paper. But it seemed to please her nonetheless. A gleam of color caught my attention on the floor near her. She was using her blood ruby as a paperweight.

“Rhys convinced you not to destroy Adriata for the blood ruby?”

Amren’s eyes flicked up, full of storms and violent seas. “He did no such thing. That convinced me not to destroy Adriata.” She pointed to her dresser.

Sprawled across the top like a snake lay a familiar necklace of diamonds and rubies. I’d seen it before—in Tarquin’s trove. “How ... what?”

Amren smiled to herself. “Varian sent it to me. To soften Tarquin’s declaration of our blood feud.”

I’d thought the rubies would need to be worn by a mighty female—and could think of no mightier female than the one before me. “Did you and Varian ... ?”

“Tempting, but no. The prick can’t decide if he hates or wants me.”

“Why can’t it be both?”

A low chuckle. “Indeed.”

Thus began weeks of waiting. Waiting for Amren to relearn a language spoken by no other in our world. Waiting for the mortal queens to answer our request to meet. Azriel continued his attempt to infiltrate their

courts—still to no avail. I heard about it mostly from Mor, who always knew when he'd return to the House of Wind, and always made a point to be there the moment he touched down.

She told me little of the specifics—even less about how the frustration of not being able to get his spies or himself into those courts took a toll on him. The standards to which he held himself, she confided in me, bordered on sadistic.

Getting Azriel to take any time for himself that didn't involve work or training was nearly impossible. And when I pointed out that he did go to Rita's with her whenever she asked, Mor simply informed me that it had taken her four centuries to get him to do that. I sometimes wondered what went on up at the House of Wind while Rhys and I stayed at the town house.

I only really visited in the mornings, when I filled the first half of my day training with Cassian—who, along with Mor, had decided to point out what foods I should be eating to gain back the weight I'd lost, to become strong and swift again. And as the days passed, I went from physical defense to learning to wield an Illyrian blade, the weapon so fine, I'd nearly taken Cassian's arm off.

But I was learning to use it—slowly. Painfully. I'd had one break from Cassian's brutal training—just one morning, when he'd flown to the human realm to see if my sisters had heard from the queens and deliver another letter from Rhys to be sent to them.

I assumed seeing Nesta went about as poorly as could be imagined, because my lesson the following morning was longer and harder than it'd been in previous days. I'd asked what, exactly, Nesta had said to him to get under his skin so easily. But Cassian had only snarled and told me to mind my own business, and that my family was full of bossy, know-it-all females. Part of me had wondered if Cassian and Varian might need to compare notes.

Most afternoons ... if Rhys was around, I'd train with him. Mind to mind, power to power. We slowly worked through the gifts I'd been given—flame and water, ice and darkness. There were others, we knew, that had gone undiscovered, undelved. Winnowing still remained impossible. I hadn't been able to do it since that snowy morning with the Attor.

It'd take time, Rhys told me each day, when I'd inevitably snap at him—time, to learn and master each one.

He infused each lesson with information about the High Lords whose power I'd stolen: about Beron, the cruel and vain High Lord of the Autumn Court; about Kallias, the quiet and cunning High Lord of Winter; about Helion Spell-Cleaver, the High Lord of Day, whose one thousand libraries had been personally looted by Amarantha, and whose clever people excelled at spell work and archived the knowledge of Prythian.

Knowing who my power had come from, Rhys said, was as important as learning the nature of the power itself. We never spoke of shape-shifting—of the talons I could sometimes summon. The threads that went along with us looking at that gift were too tangled, the unspoken history too violent and bloody.

So I learned the other courts' politics and histories, and learned their masters' powers, until my waking and sleeping hours were spent with flame singeing my mouth and hoarfrost cracking between my fingers. And each night, exhausted from a day of training my body and powers, I tumbled into a heavy sleep, laced with jasmine-scented darkness. Even my nightmares were too tired to hound me.

On the days when Rhys was called elsewhere, to deal with the inner workings of his own court, to remind them who ruled them or mete out judgment, to prepare for our inevitable visit to Hybern, I would read, or sit with Amren while she worked on the Book, or stroll through Velaris with Mor. The latter was perhaps my favorite, and the female certainly excelled at finding ways to spend money. I'd peeked only once at the account Rhys had set up for me—just once, and realized he was grossly, grossly overpaying me.

I tried not to be disappointed on those afternoons that he was gone, tried not to admit that I'd begun looking forward to it—mastering my powers, and ... bantering with him. But even when he was gone, he would talk to me, in the notes that had become our own strange secret.

One day, he'd written to me from Cesere, a small city in the northeast where he was meeting with the few surviving priestesses to discuss rebuilding after their temple had been wrecked by Hybern's forces. None of the priestesses were like Ianthe, he'd promised.

Tell me about the painting.

I'd written back from my seat in the garden, the fountain finally revived with the return of milder weather, There's not much to say.

Tell me about it anyway.

It had taken me a while to craft the response, to think through that little hole in me and what it had once meant and felt like. But then I said, There was a time when all I wanted was enough money to keep me and my family fed so that I could spend my days painting. That was all I wanted. Ever.

A pause. Then he'd written, And now?

Now, I'd replied, I don't know what I want. I can't paint anymore.

Why?

Because that part of me is empty. Though maybe that night I'd seen him kneeling in the bed ... maybe that had changed a bit. I had contemplated the next sentence, then written, Did you always want to be High Lord?

A lengthy pause again. Yes. And no. I saw how my father ruled and knew from a young age that I did not want to be like him. So I decided to be a different sort of High Lord; I wanted to protect my people, change the perceptions of the Illyrians, and eliminate the corruption that plagued the land.

For a moment, I hadn't been able to stop myself from comparing: Tamlin hadn't wanted to be High Lord. He resented being High Lord—and maybe ... maybe that was part of why the court had become what it was. But Rhysand, with a vision, with the will and desire and passion to do it ... He'd built something.

And then gone to the mat to defend it.

It was what he'd seen in Tarquin, why those blood rubies had hit him so hard. Another High Lord with vision—a radical vision for the future of Prythian.

So I wrote back, At least you make up for your shameless flirting by being one hell of a High Lord.

He'd returned that evening, smirking like a cat, and had merely said "One hell of a High Lord?" by way of greeting.

I'd sent a bucket's worth of water splashing into his face.

Rhys hadn't bothered to shield against it. And instead shook his wet hair like a dog, spraying me until I yelped and darted away. His laughter had chased me up the stairs.

Winter was slowly loosening its grip when I awoke one morning and found another letter from Rhys beside my bed. No pen.

No training with your second-favorite Illyrian this morning. The queens finally deigned to write back. They're coming to your family's estate tomorrow.

I didn't have time for nerves. We left after dinner, soaring into the thawing human lands under cover of darkness, the brisk wind screaming as Rhys held me tightly.

My sisters were ready the following morning, both dressed in finery fit for any queen, Fae or mortal.

I supposed I was, too.

I wore a white gown of chiffon and silk, cut in typical Night Court fashion to reveal my skin, the gold accents on the dress glittering in the midmorning light streaming through the sitting room windows. My father, thankfully, would remain on the continent for another two months—due to whatever vital trade he'd been seeking across the kingdoms.

Near the fireplace, I stood beside Rhys, who was clad in his usual black, his wings gone, his face a calm mask. Only the dark crown atop his head—the metal shaped like raven's feathers—was different. The crown that was the sibling to my gold diadem.

Cassian and Azriel monitored everything from the far wall, no weapons in sight.

But their Siphons gleamed, and I wondered what manner of weapon, exactly, they could craft with it, if the need demanded it. For that had been one of the demands the queens had issued for this meeting: no weapons. No matter that the Illyrian warriors themselves were weapons enough.

Mor, in a red gown similar to mine, frowned at the clock atop the white mantel, her foot tapping on the ornate carpet. Despite my wishes for her to get to know my sisters, Nesta and Elain had been so tense and pale when...